

Betye Saar



Offerings...bouquets of symbols, myths, colors,
meanings...questions...veiled answers

Sun, Moon, stars and legends captured
in magic windows.

Fetishes, amulets to ward off the Evil Eye
that still threatens

Strange superstitions disguised as
sophisticated apparitions

Charms and spells nestled in lizard skins, seed pods
rainbows of broken mirror reflecting
fears and follies

Encapsulated nights in tiny spaces
expand the mind

Here and there, a subtle comment makes itself heard
can you read me?

Enigmatic memories hidden in contained palaces
vestiges of vanished civilizations
spirits of the Swap-meet join in ceremonies
long forgotten...now....feasts for the eye

Opulent icons, fragile relics
theatrical enchantment
beaded whispers, feathered touches
tarnished metals, faded brocades intuitively
reborn in gentle splendor

Protective shrines...personal Altars
holding layered lacy meanings
conjuring unknown forces, fates

Sorrows forgotten
Tributes paid
Magic Performed

Among other gifts, she gave me back the mystery of the
moon...

Josine Ianco-Starrels
Los Angeles, January 1975

spite its hermeticism—astrological signs, the Eye of God, sky, earth and subterranean creatures, the realm of death. Still other boxes she has made are like reliquaries, containing pictures and scraps of letters, lace and butterflies, objects black and white, which at once evoke Saar's childhood and encapsulate the gently ironic side of a collective racial memory.

The tiny overall size of Saar's pieces and the extreme miniaturization of their components are reminiscent of Joseph Cornell's work, which she has always loved; nevertheless, her evocations are specifically related to the culture in which she was raised and to the spiritual and occult concerns which are, for her, an outgrowth of that culture. The pieces themselves, paradoxically, because they are miniature, afford an immense view of the universe by allowing the viewer to enter them visually and psychologically; they must be occupied slowly, however, because there is so much in so small a space. Miniature invites fantasy and reverie; Gaston Bachelard remarked that insofar as the world can be miniaturized, it can be possessed. Betye Saar's work makes available to us an intangible world of delicate, mysterious images, exotic and magical, nurtured by dreams and consumed by the imagination.

Marcia Tucker
Curator

Biography

1926	July 30, born in Los Angeles, California
1949	BA, University of California, Los Angeles
1958-62	Graduate studies at California State University, Long Beach
1962	Graduate studies at University of Southern California, Los Angeles
1966	Graduate studies at California State University, Northridge
1968-73	Free-lance designer, Napa Valley Theater Company, American Film Institute, Inner City Cultural Center, Los Angeles
1971	Lecturer at California State University, Hayward
1971-73	Free-lance lecturer at California State Universities and Colleges

Betye Saar's intense, miniaturized images, collaged and boxed, are drawn from the vocabulary of the unconscious; they stem from her preoccupation with occult and mystical worlds, the rituals of the palmist and astrologer, fetishism, voodoo, psychic phenomena and the obsessive, repetitive motifs of Africa and the Orient.

Her earlier pieces were directly political, incorporating satirical, violent, derogatory images of blacks—Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom, Little Black Sambo—produced by a white society. Divorced from things mystical, the iconography of dancing darkies, watermelons and cotton balls was transformed by rifles and black-power symbols into bolder statements of anger and frustration. Less intimate than the newer work, these pieces were a direct response to her conviction that "ethnic minorities themselves just don't get precious."

In the early 1970s, politics became subsumed by Saar's desire to explore the roots and residues of black folk culture; growing up in Los Angeles, she was impressed by Rodia's Watts Towers, close to where her grandmother lived; the towers had, she says, "mother wit," a special kind of intuition.

As a child she avidly collected "things." For her, finding something discarded or ugly and recycling it into something else is another kind of mother wit. Such recycled objects constitute the Folk Altars she has made for many years; these contain black dolls, skulls, eyes, hearts, shells, feathers, pieces of wood, mirrors, scraps of leather, candles. The altars are larger sculptural works, powerful, frontal and iconic, but the relationship of the viewer to the works affords a sense of exclusion or isolation, partly because of their size and partly because they are obviously places of worship.

The pieces of the past three years in this exhibition explore the symbols, mysteries and rituals of many cultures; the iconography is universal de-

1972 Graduate studies at American Film Institute, Los Angeles
Received Purchase Award, "Art Unlimited," Downey Museum of Art, Downey, California
Received Purchase Award, "Fifth California Small Images Exhibition," California State University, Los Angeles

Solo Exhibitions

1972 Multi-Cul Gallery, Los Angeles
Berkeley Art Center
1973 University of California, Santa Cruz
California State University, Los Angeles

Selected Group Exhibitions

1968 "25 California Women Artists," Lytton Center of Visual Arts, Los Angeles
1970 "Dimensions of Black," La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art
"1970 Annual of Contemporary American Sculpture," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
1971 "Five Black Artists," Lang Art Gallery, Scripps College, Claremont, California
"Black Untitled 11: The Figure," Oakland Museum of Art
1972 "Fifth California Small Images Exhibition," California State University, Los Angeles
"Black Artist Invitational," Los Angeles County Museum of Art
"Art Unlimited," Downey Museum of Art
"Small Environments," University Galleries, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
1973 "Dimensional Prints," Los Angeles County Museum of Art
"The Drawing Show, Black Mirror," Womanspace, Los Angeles
"Women Artists in the Museum Collection," University Art Museum, Berkeley
"Blacks: USA: 1973," New York Cultural Center
1974 "Sculpture and Assemblage," Art Rental Gallery, Los Angeles County Museum of Art
"Three Women Artists," Palos Verdes Art Museum, California
"Sixteen Los Angeles Women Artists," Cerritos College, Norwalk, California
1974-75 "West Coast Image: The Black Image," Crocker Art Gallery, Sacramento, and Barnsdall Art Gallery, Los Angeles



Photograph by William Davis

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New York, New York 10021

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Catalogue

All works are mixed-media assemblages. Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width preceding depth. Unless otherwise noted, all works are lent by the artist.

1. *Black Girl's Window*, 1969
35¾ x 18 x 1½
2. *Mojo Bag*, 1970
63 x 16½
3. *Window of the Ancient Sirens*, 1971
14¾ x 23½ x 1¾
4. *Aunt Sally's Mojo Box*, 1972
13½ x 11 x 1
5. *Bird Mojo Box*, 1972
33 x 17 x 2½
6. *Essence of Egypt*, 1972
13¼ x 11 x 1
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Lionel Bell,
Los Angeles
7. *Grandma's Garden*, 1972
13¼ x 11 x 1
8. *Grandma's House*, 1972
13¼ x 11 x 1
9. *Gris Gris Box*, 1972
17 x 8½ x 2¾
10. *Lama*, 1972
13¼ x 11 x 1
11. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972
11¾ x 8 x 2½
Lent by University Art Museum,
Berkeley
12. *Mystic Window of the Universe*, 1972
44 x 21 x 2½
13. *Ten Mojo Secrets*, 1972
41 x 20 x 2
14. *Two Darcy Songs*, 1972
7 x 20½
15. *Wizard*, 1972
13¼ x 11 x 1
16. *Adori*, 1973
13¼ x 11 x 1
17. *My Last Buffalo*, 1973
13¼ x 11 x 1
18. *Bittersweet*, 1974
19 x 14¾ x 4
19. *De Queen of Sheba, She*, 1974
13½ x 11¼ x 1
20. *Eternity*, 1974
8⅞ x 12⅞ x 1½
Lent by Josine Ianco-Starrels,
Los Angeles
21. *Sadhaka*, 1974
16 x 11¾ x 6½
22. *Friends and Lovers*, 1974
13½ x 11¼ x 1
23. *It's Only a Matter of Time*, 1974
16 x 13 x 1
24. *Journey to Zimbabwe*, 1974
15½ x 11½ x 1½
25. *Memories of Kemi*, 1974
3½ x 11¾ x 11¾
26. *Miz Ann's Charm*, 1974
11¼ x 7¾ x ¾
27. *Rainbow Garden*, 1974
17 x 13
28. *Shield of Quality*, 1974
4 x 14¾ x 18
29. *Shrine Study (Shango)*, 1974
11¾ x 6 x 4¾
30. *The Time Inbetween*, 1974
2 x 11½ x 16
31. *Vedanta*, 1974
13¼ x 11 x 1
32. *Karmapa*, 1975
13¼ x 11 x 1
33. *Mis Hannah's Secret*, 1975
3 x 11½ x 16
34. *Rainbow Shrine*, 1975
21 x 12 x 7
35. *Sky Window*, 1975
24 x 18 x 1½

Cover: 22. *Friends and Lovers*, 1974